



United Nations

Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

SRSB BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL

**Briefing to the United Nations Security Council
by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Roza Otunbayeva
New York, 20 December 2023**

[As delivered]

Mr. President,

I am aware that the Security Council has already considered the situation in Afghanistan several times over the past month, including on the situation of women and on the Independent Assessment prepared by Ambassador Sinirlioğlu. In a world of multiplying crises, I am grateful for this ongoing attention to Afghanistan. Many Afghans inform me that they fear being forgotten, as they have been in the past. I strongly believe that my role, and that of UNAMA, is to prevent this from happening.

We have just celebrated the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948. Afghanistan was an original signatory to this declaration. But the key features of the human rights situation in Afghanistan today are a record of systemic discrimination against women and girls, repression of political dissent and free speech, a lack of meaningful representation of minorities, and ongoing instances of extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and ill-treatment. Despite the recent release of two women activists, a number of human right defenders and media workers continue to be arbitrarily detained.

The lack of progress in resolving human rights issues is a key factor behind the current impasse.

Accepting and working to uphold the international norms and standards, as set out in the UN Treaties that Afghanistan has ratified, will continue to be a non-negotiable condition for a seat at the United Nations, as the Special Coordinator made clear and as we continually remind our interlocutors in Afghanistan.

UNAMA has a dialogue on human rights with the de facto authorities. In some areas there are openings, such as on the treatment of detainees. We see that many of the de facto authorities are open to further engagement with UNAMA and to seek an awareness of human rights standards. Dialogue and direction is furthered through the findings and recommendations of the UNAMA human rights reports, the most recent of which is how the de facto authorities respond to complaints of gender-based violence against women and girls.

Mr. President,

The humanitarian situation remains of grave concern. We are entering another winter in which more than 20 million people will depend on aid. Given this year's drop in funding, and by extension provision of assistance, many needy Afghans will be more vulnerable than they were this time

last year. OCHA will brief separately in greater detail, but I wanted to use my voice to stress the urgency of this issue.

The de facto authorities continue to maintain a generally good level of security. Unexploded ordnance remains a significant concern in Afghanistan, especially for children. Relations between the de facto Directorate of Mine Action Coordination and the United Nations have improved and the suspension limiting any form of cooperation was lifted in October this year.

The Shia community remains at disproportionate risk of harm. Three recent attacks against Shia communities killing 39 people were documented in the period covered by the Secretary-General's latest report. All these attacks were claimed by ISIL-KP. Three further targeted attacks on Shia clerics in Herat killed nine members of the Shia community.

At the same time regional countries remain deeply concerned about additional possible threats emanating from inside Afghanistan. In particular, Pakistan remains convinced that the de facto authorities have done too little to contain the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, which has claimed major recent terrorist attacks inside Pakistan.

Last week I visited Islamabad and raised there the issue of the expulsion of undocumented Afghans living in Pakistan. Many of these Afghans had fled after the collapse of the Republic. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees issued a "No Return Advisory" for Afghanistan in August 2021, and renewed it in February 2023, citing the humanitarian and human rights situation in Afghanistan. This applies to all Afghans regardless of their legal status.

The policy and the reasons for it have led to a deterioration of relations between the two countries. It is essential that both sides take measures to prevent further deterioration and begin working on issues of common interest. I have conveyed this to both Kabul and Islamabad.

Nearly half a million Afghans have returned at the onset of winter. I have been on the border myself, where a consortium of humanitarian actors are working constantly alongside the de facto authorities, to provide assistance. This has proven to be an effective cooperation and the de facto authorities have responded with great professionalism despite lacking resources. The returnees are the poorest of the poor. 80,000 of them have nowhere in Afghanistan to go. The human rights consequences for women and girls forced to return are particularly severe.

Mr. President,

The quality of education in Afghanistan is a growing concern. The international community has rightly focused on the need to reverse the ban on girls' education, but the deteriorating quality of education and access to it is affecting boys as well.

We are receiving more and more anecdotal evidence that girls of all ages can study at madrassas. It is not entirely clear, however, what constitutes a madrassa, if there is a standardized curriculum that allows modern education subjects, and how many girls are able to study in madrassas.

The de facto Ministry of Education is reportedly undertaking an assessment of these schools as well as a review of the public school curriculum. De facto educational authorities continue to tell us that they are working on creating conditions to allow girls to return to school. But time is passing while a generation of girls is falling behind. A failure to provide a sufficiently modern curriculum with equality of access for both girls and boys will make it impossible to implement the de facto authorities' own agenda on economic self-sufficiency.

Mr. President,

In my previous briefing I referred to the deepening problem of climate change in Afghanistan. Since then, COP28 took place in Dubai. UNAMA had strived to arrange the participation of a technical delegation from Afghanistan. We were unable to because of complications of accreditation. Afghanistan is one of the most climate change-affected countries in the world while it has contributed least to its causes. I continue to believe that the de facto authorities need to be part of this global conversation.

Addressing Afghanistan's climate crisis should transcend politics. The lack of water from recurring drought has reached a level of urgency that is felt across the country – from rural districts, where people abandon their fields for lack of irrigation water, to the national capital whose aquifers are mostly dry, leaving millions without safe drinking water.

Afghans cannot address the enormity of this challenge alone, and its impacts will not be contained within Afghanistan's borders. The de facto authorities have demonstrated a desire to engage with the international community on this issue. They accept their responsibilities in addressing it, including honouring Afghanistan's commitments to UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement. I urge all of us to find ways of including Afghanistan in future meetings on climate change.

Another area where there is great scope for cooperation is on counter-narcotics. As UNODC has reported, the de facto authorities successfully reduced the cultivation of opium by 95 percent, addressing a long-standing international concern. In Kabul I created a working group of ambassadors to organize an international response to provide assistance to affected farmers as well as to drug addicts. We need, however, greater international attention and focus on this issue from donors and the region.

Mr. President,

I would now like to address the report of the Special Coordinator, Ambassador Sinirlioğlu and UNAMA's thoughts on the way forward.

I welcome the Independent Assessment. It has provided needed clarity on a number of issues, backing up UNAMA's assessments. Most importantly it provides a clearly-articulated endpoint – an Afghan state fully reintegrated within the international system without passing through a further cycle of violence and in accordance with international law.

There is something in this report for each stakeholder to dislike, but I have been urging all of them to focus on the larger objective.

In this regard, we noted that the de facto authorities deemed the appointment of a Special Envoy to be unacceptable. The de facto Foreign Minister explained that the long history of UN special envoys in Afghanistan was not positive.

In general, the de facto authorities' response to the report indicates a preference for bi-lateral approaches to multilateral ones. They continue to maintain that the ban on girls' education and women working are internal matters, despite their contravention of current treaty obligations. This approach, I fear, will prolong the impasse that the assessment is intended to resolve.

Mr. President,

Our future approach must be guided I believe by two factors. First, a durable and more detailed international consensus on Afghanistan. I hope we can achieve this at the planned next Special Envoy's meeting. Second, making far greater use of the de facto authorities' willingness to engage

in dialogue with members of the international community. Dialogue does not legitimize. It can be used to express disapproval yet encourage change. We have often spoken of the need to learn lessons from our engagement since August 2021. One lesson, I believe, is that there has simply not been enough of it. There must be more direct engagement with the de facto authorities, including in Kabul.

I am very grateful to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation for organizing the seminal conference on Women in Islam in Jeddah last month. The demonstration of unity from the Islamic world on women's rights was essential. These demonstrations over time will surely have a cumulative positive effect.

Notwithstanding the impasse on women's rights, UNAMA has had certain successful interactions on climate, micro-finance, counter-narcotics and drug addiction, demining, private sector development, human rights, and governance. These are areas that directly affect the lives of millions of Afghans. Technical assistance is required at the working level to de facto ministries delivering services in these areas.

The de facto authorities, for their part, need to understand the value of the multilateral offer that has been put before them by the Special Coordinator. It elevates the issue of Afghanistan at a time when other issues are filling the international agenda and clarifies a pathway to finally resolving Afghanistan's relationship with the international community. Compromises, however, will be required from all sides.

I will continue, Mr. President, to make every effort, with all the resources that I have, to encourage stakeholders towards the arena where compromises can be made.

Thank you.

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